

One Step From Heaven : Harlan and Billie

By Kate Simon

Billie Kilbourne drove down to the long gravel drive to the family homestead. She hadn't been to the Kilbourne ranch in far too long. Her parents took her back to visit her grandmother each summer. She continued to visit Gran at least once a year but she talked to her a few times a month. The family had raised horses since before Texas was a state. She loved visiting Gran. She'd spent summers riding and taking care of the horses the family raised. Gran liked to brag that one of their horses won the Kentucky Derby. She always said they raised the best horses in all of Texas. That boast never went over well with the Boones, who had the next ranch over. The rivalry had been contentious since the 1860's.

She'd gotten the call last week that Gran was reaching the end of her time. She was ninety five and Billie was sure Gran was waiting until she got there. She smiled at the thought of Wilhelmina Kilbourne. Billie was almost as stubborn as her Gran. She parked the car in front of the porch and looked at the door. Even though a woman ninety five nearing the end of her life was not a tragedy, it sure as hell felt like it.

Billie knocked on the door and found it open. She looked in the front rooms for Sophie, Gran's housekeeper. "Hello? Sophie? Anyone?"

Sophie came down the from upstairs. "Billie! You're here!" Sophie had been with Gran for twenty years and was more family than hired help. She pulled Billie into a tight hug. "I'm so glad you're here."

"So am I. Is she in bed?" she asked quietly.

"She's in the kitchen."

"Excuse me?"

"She's making your apple crumble. Said she always made it for you and wouldn't stop now."

"But she's..."

"Dying. Right. The doctor said it could be anytime. She seems to disagree."

“Good Lord.” Billie walked into the kitchen and saw her Gran, white haired and frail, pulling a tin out of the oven. If it wasn’t for her gray pallor, she’d have sworn the doctors were wrong. Billie could tell, she didn’t have much time. “Gran, what are you doing?”

“Billie, sweetheart, you made it.” Gran gave her a hug and kissed her cheek. I’ve made you an apple crumble.”

“I can see that. Why aren’t you resting?”

She gave Billie a dismissive wave. “Bah. Pretty soon all I’ll do is rest. We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“First, sit and I’ll dish you out some crumble. Sweet tea?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” Billie watched her grandmother move slowly around the kitchen she’d work in for seventy five years. She could probably do it with her eyes closed. She took a forkful of the crumble and sighed. “Oh, Gran, this is so good.”

“The recipe is in the box.”

Billie’s eyes welled. “Gran, I…”

She reached for her hand. “I know dear. This is hard for you.”

“You’re all I have left,” she whispered.

“I know, sweetheart. Losing your parents was very difficult for you.”

Billie was ashamed at her selfishness. She hadn’t just lost her father, Gran had lost her only son. “I’m sorry, Gran. Losing Dad was so hard on you.”

She took a tissue from her pocket and dabbed her eyes. “I thought God was very unfair to take Bobby so soon after he took my Robert.” She put the tissue back in her pocket and smiled. “But I will see them and your dear mother soon enough.” She held her hand. “I need to be able to tell them you’re okay.”

“Gran, I’m fine.”

“You can’t hide from me, child. You could have come to me.”

“No, Gran, I couldn’t.”

“You’re here now. That’s what matters. I need to talk to you about what’s coming. I’ve written my wishes down and you’ll find everything in my desk drawer. No need to worry about the service. I’ve already talked to the pastor and funeral director.”

“Gran!”

“What? There’s no need for you to fret over it. I know what I want and now they do too.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

She gave her a smile. “Very well, dear. There is of course the ranch.”

“What about it?”

“I’m leaving it to you.”

“What? What about the cousins?”

“Robert’s nieces and nephews? I haven’t seen one of them in twenty years.”

“This is the Kilbourne Ranch. They’re all Kilbournes. They’re all expecting their share, family legacy and all.”

“Too damn bad. My lawyer has made sure my will is iron clad. You get it all. You can sell it if you want, but I’m hoping you’ll stay on.”

“Gran, I don’t know anything about raising horses.”

“Harlan will help you.”

“Harlan?”

“My lawyer, Harlan Boone.”

“Boone? Your lawyer is a Boone?”

“He’s an excellent lawyer. He’s an even better horse man. His family has been raising horses almost as long as we have.”

“And they’ve been fighting with us just as long. Water, land, you name it, the Boones and the Kilbournes fought over it. As I recall a Boone shot a Kilbourne over a cow.”

“That was more than one hundred years ago when we both still ran cattle. Harlan stayed with the ranch but he also went to law school. He represents some in town. Mostly he runs his ranch.”

“If he’s busy with his ranch why is bothering to be your lawyer?”

“Because I asked him.”

“I don’t know, Gran. Boones and Kilbournes. It never bodes well.”

Harlan Boone drove down the road toward the Kilbourne ranch. Ms. Kilbourne had asked him to come to her home. He wasn't surprised that, despite her health and extreme age, Miss Willa was still sharp as a tack. She was very clear about her intentions for her granddaughter to inherit everything. It was a substantial inheritance, worth millions. Kilbourne Ranch was one of the biggest horse ranches in Texas. Besides his ranch of course.

Mr. Robert had been a shrewd business man. He'd built his business by raising the best horses. His careful breeding produced colts that regularly sold for seven figures. He'd also been careful not to overextend himself. As a result, the ranch was free and clear. Miss Willa's granddaughter was set for life.

He knew Billie Kilbourne. He'd met her one summer when she came to visit. It was the summer he'd been working part time on a construction crew. His family had money but his father was adamant that he earn his own way in life. They were going to pay for his college but cars, clothes, dates, all of that was on him. He resented it then. Now he realized how right his father had been. It had given him an appreciation for what he had because he'd earned it. It hadn't been handed to him. He was repairing the roof of one of the Kilbourne barns on blistering hot day in June. At first he thought she was an apparition. The heat had gotten to him. He climbed down the ladder for some shade.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Yeah, it's just hot as a hell."

She ran into the barn and came back with a bottle of cold soda and a towel. "Here. You look like you need this."

He smiled and tipped his hat. "Why thank you, ma'am." She giggled and ran off to the house. She just a kid, no more than fifteen. She had fair skin, with dark brown hair and eyes. He could see in the girl the shadow of the woman she would become. Harlan decided then and there that Billie Kilbourne was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen or would ever see. Thirty five years had not changed his mind.

He pulled up to house and parked next to a small sports car. Billie must be here. He reigned in his expectations. It had been thirty five years. People change. He walked up the porch and knocked. Some people change. Not Billie Kilbourne.

“May I help you? she asked.

“Hello, Ms. Kilbourne. I’m Harlan Boone, you’re grandmother’s attorney.”

“Please come in. We’re in the kitchen.”

He walked into the big ranch kitchen and found his client drinking sweet tea and not on her death bed, as he expected. “Hello Miss Willa. You’re looking beautiful today.”

“Oh Harlan, I’m a very old woman. Beautiful past me by fifty years ago.”

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I beg to differ.”

“Flatterer,” she smiled through a blush.

“Can I offer you a sweet tea, Mr. Boone?” asked Billie.

“Thank you. And it’s Harlan, please.”

“Billie,” she said as she set the glass in front of him. He could see the distrust in her eyes.

“Your grandmother has asked me to explain her wishes for you and the estate.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

Miss Willa grabbed for her hand. “Billie, sweetheart, you need to do this. For me.”

Harlan could tell Billie was fighting back tears. “Miss Willa has made sure that everything is in place. I’m just here to explain what the estate entails.”

“What’s your cut?”

“Wilhelmina!” shouted her grandmother in a surprisingly loud tone. “Harlan has been our family lawyer and more importantly a friend to me for twenty five years. Your grandfather trusted him and so do I. That should be enough for you.”

“Gran! He’s a Boone and a lawyer. That doesn’t spell trustworthy.”

Harlan tried to stay calm for Miss Willa's sake. "Billie, I understand that both Boones and lawyers don't have the best reputation in your eyes. I am an excellent lawyer with a honest reputation. I have been paid by your family for writing various contracts and services over the years. I don't normally do wills or estate planning but in the matter of being the executor of your grandmother's will, I have taken no fee and I have no share in the estate."

"What? Why would you do that?"

"Because she asked me." Harlan was gratified at Billie's stunned expression. "As to the matter of the Boone Kilbourne feud, I hold no grudge toward your family. I never have. I don't even know how the feud started."

Billie sighed and looked a little embarrassed. "Neither do I."

"I do."

"Gran? You know? Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"I didn't need to until now."

"What?" asked Billie.

Miss Willa ignored her question. "It was 1890. Josiah Boone was the only son and heir to the Boone family fortune. His father, Caleb, had groomed him from the time he was a child to take over. There was one thing they didn't count on. When Josiah was eighteen he fell in love with Emma Kilbourne, the youngest child of Silas and Mary Kilbourne. Emma was only fifteen but she loved Josiah. Her parents found out and forbid them to see each other. She was still too young. They tried to keep the young lovers apart but Josiah and Emma would not be denied. Finally Silas sent her away to boarding school. It was a fancy finishing school in New York. They hoped a few years apart would be the end of it.

"It wasn't?" asked Billie.

"No. They wrote letters, at least one a week. But then the letters stopped. There was an influenza outbreak. The family was notified Emma had been stricken. They told

Josiah and they tried to get to her but they were too late. She died the night before they arrived. She was just seventeen.

“Oh God,” Billie gasped.

“Josiah blamed Emma’s death on Silas for sending her away. From then on Josiah hated all the Kilbournes. Eventually life returned to what passed for normal. Josiah married and had a family.”

“Otherwise I wouldn’t be here,” said Harlan.”

Miss Willa smiled. “Exactly. But things were never the same between our two families. Finally, your father and my Robert set things to right. They agreed to put the feud behind them. The deal was sealed with Emma’s Rose.”

“What?” Harlan gasped.

“What’s Emma’s Rose?”

“Only the finest horse ever produced on Boone Ranch. She produced some the most profitable foals in our history.”

“Her sire was Black Lightning. The most prolific stud we ever had. One of his descendants won the Kentucky Derby.”

“But what about everything that came after them?” asked Billie.

“All a product of a broken heart. It’s time to put it to rest.” Miss Willa pushed herself away from the table. “And it’s time for me to rest.”

Billie stood and took her grandmother’s arm. “I’ll help you, Gran.” She turned to Harlan. “I’ll be back.”

Harlan helped himself to some more tea and took a deep whiff of the apple crumble on the counter. It smelled of cinnamon and home. His mother made something like it. She'd been gone more than twenty years. There wasn't a day he didn't think of her.

"Would you like some?"

He turned to see Billie had returned to the kitchen. "I was just remembering something my mother made for me."

"Then you must have some. It's my favorite." She dished some out and set it in front of him. He took a bite and rolled his eyes.

"This is delicious. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Is Miss Willa all settled?"

"Yes. Her room is on the first level. I got her settled in." She sat down opposite him. "I can't believe I'm losing her."

"She's had a good life and she's doing this on her terms. Who could ask for a better?"

"You're right, of course. It doesn't make it easier."

"No, it doesn't." He needed to go over the details of the estate but now was not the time. "Is Sophie here?"

"What? Yes. She's working up stairs."

"Come on." He stood and walked toward the stairs. "Sophie?"

She came to the top of the stairs. "Yes, Mr. Boone."

"Miss Billie and I are going to take a walk. Miss Willa is resting. Will you keep an eye out. You have my number if you need us."

"Sure thing, Mr. Boone."

“Let’s get some air.” He didn’t wait for her to object and opened the front door.

“I shouldn’t leave.”

“You need a few minutes to take this all in. Let’s go.” He held out his hand and was surprised when she took it.

“Where are we going?”

“You need to start looking at this place in a new light.” He walked her toward the first barn. It was the oldest and the one he repaired all those years ago. “You know I’ve met you before.”

“You did?”

“Yes, I did.” He pointed to the top of the roof. “I was up there, fixing your roof.”

“Excuse me? A Boone was fixing the roof of a Kilbourne?”

He chuckled. “I worked for a living, just like everyone else. I worked for Johnny Carlson the summer before I went to college. It was the middle of June and there’d been a bad storm the day before. I was fixing the roof and it was hot as blazes. I saw you watching me and first I thought you were an apparition. I must have had heat stroke. I came down the ladder and you brought me a cold soda and a towel.”

“When was this?”

“Thirty five years ago.”

“You remember me after all this time?”

“You’re very memorable,” he smiled. “Let’s go in. Henry’s probably still working.” He walked inside and looked around. They’d converted this original barn to offices and storage. “Yo, Henry! You here?”

Henry walked out from the back office. He was white haired and his skin was weathered from the sun. He’d been here for decades. “Yeah, yeah, quit you’re hollering, Boone.” He stopped when he saw Billie. “Miss Billie,” he said quietly. He walked toward her and held out his hand. “I’m so glad you’re here. I know she’s been waiting for you.”

“I thought so too, Henry.”

Harlan saw Henry fighting tears. “Miss Willa is one of the best people that’s ever been. If you need anything, I mean anything at all, Miss Billie, me and the boys are here for you.”

Billie pulled him into a hug. “Thank you, Henry. I really appreciate that.”

Harlan decided to divert the conversation before they were all weeping. “How’s things going? Any problems with the clients?”

“No. Most of our clients know what’s happening with Miss Willa. They know that their horses we’re boarding are well cared for. We have the staff.” Henry looked at Willa and Harlan knew what he was wondering. Apparently so did Billie.

“Please tell the men that I appreciate their hard work, especially right now. I do not anticipate anything changing in the operation of the ranch for the foreseeable future.”

“Thank you, Miss Billie. I’ll let the men know.”

“Henry, Miss Billie and I are going to walk around a bit. Anything we should see?”

“Oh you need to see Blue Bonnet and her foal. We haven’t named her yet. She was just born yesterday.”

“I’d like that.”

Harlan nodded. “Where’s she at?”

“Back barn, away from the noise.”

They walked past several barns and Harlan waved back at a few of the men. Billie just seemed to take it all in, breathing in the hay and the horses and the cool breeze. They nodded to a young man at the entrance to the barn. “Blake, this is Miss Billie, I don’t think you’ve met.”

“Hello Miss Billie. I sure am sorry about what’s happening with your grandma. Heck, she’s so feisty, I thought she’d be with us forever.” The boy suddenly blanched. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I meant no disrespect.”

Billie smiled. She extended her hand to him, then covered it with her other hand. "Blake, I feel exactly the same way." The boy nodded and smiled.

"We're here to see Blue Bonnet and her foal."

"Sure thing, Mr. Boone. Blue's real friendly. She might even let you pet her baby." Blake led them to an extra large stall where a beautiful chestnut mare was tending to a miniature version of herself. "I'll leave you to it. I need to see to Major. He's waiting for his brushing and he get's testy if I'm late."

"He knows if you're late?" asked Billie.

"He knows if he hasn't gotten his apple."

"Then you best get to it," she smiled. Blake nodded and went to the next barn. She stared at the sweet mother and child. "They're so beautiful," said Billie.

"They're yours," said Harlan.

"What?"

"Blue Bonnet is a Kilbourne horse. So is her baby. They belong to you. All of this is yours."

"I don't want it."

"What?"

Billie turned to face him and tears were running down her face. "I don't want any of it. I want Gran."

"I know. That's why you deserve it."

She began to sob and he pulled her close. He held her until she pulled away. "I'm sorry. I got you all damp."

"It's alright. Really. I'll dry."

"It's just so overwhelming."

"I know it is but I also know you can handle it. You're a natural."

“How can you be so sure?”

“The way you talked to the men. You knew Henry needed reassurance. The men are understandably concerned about what will happen to their jobs.”

“Haven’t you been handling things?”

“Until recently Miss Willa handled things. I’ve been helping out when I can but I have my own ranch to run.”

“How do you expect me to do this?”

“Cody and I will help you get your footing.”

“Cody?”

“My son. He’s my ranch manager. You have a great team already in place. Henry and your men are some of the best in the business.”

“I’m a book editor! I live in Houston. I drink too much coffee and complain about the traffic. I’ve only spent a few weeks at a time here. I can’t do this!”

He stood very close to her. “You’re Wilhelmina Kilbourne. Yes, you can.”

“How are you so sure?” she demanded.

“Because Miss Willa has faith in you.”

“I’ll let her down.”

He took her hand and led her out toward the pasture. They took upon the fence, looking out on a beautiful field. “Miss Willa told me how you loved this place. You came here every summer.”

“I did. It was the best time of my life,” she smiled. “But that doesn’t mean I know how to run things.”

“Why didn’t you stay?”

“I went to college. Then I had to get a job. The next thing I knew it was thirty years later.”

“What did you study?”

“English. I wanted to be a writer. Instead I got a job editing other people’s work.”

“You could still come back.”

“Not a lot of call for a book editor in Hawthorn.”

“You don’t have to work.”

“I enjoy eating. That requires cash.”

“As owner of Kilbourne you’re a very wealthy woman.”

“Excuse me?”

“Kilbourne Ranch is one of the most successful operations in the country. Your grandparents were brilliant business people. The ranch is debt free and you, Billie, are worth millions.”

“That’s not possible,” she gasped.

“It is. Look around, Billie. This is your heritage. Kilbournes have lived on the land since 1864. Your grandmother believes in you and your ability to keep this going.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“You don’t need to make any decisions right now. Now it’s about spending time with your grandmother.”

Billie looked at him with tears in her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Billie watched as Harlan drove out to the main road. Her head was swimming with everything that was happening. Everything in her life was turning upside down. She was losing Gran. She was going to inherit the ranch and everything that goes with it. And then there was Harlan. She didn't tell him she remembered him too. She remembered seeing that slender cowboy on the roof of her grandfather's barn. She didn't know he was a Boone, but it wouldn't have mattered. He had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. When she brought him a soda and a towel he smiled at her and tipped his hat. He was the first man who didn't treat her like a child.

She'd spent years sorting out her emotions. The best she'd learned to do was to keep them in order. She'd learned to handle one thing at a time but now she felt like she couldn't breathe. She went into her grandfather's den and closed the door. An hour later she looked in on Gran. She was surprised to see her sitting up in bed and looking through a scrapbook.

"Gran?"

"Come in, dear."

"Did you have a good rest?"

"I did." She patted the side of the bed. "Come sit." Billie got comfortable next to Gran, just like she had a child. "Look at this. You were five."

Billie pointed at the pony smiled. "That's Buttercup!"

"You were a natural. Such a good seat."

"Mom and Dad couldn't believe you'd given me my own pony."

"I don't know why? Bobby had his own pony at three."

"Three?" she smiled. "He was always yelling at me to not go so fast."

Gran patted her hand. "Parents are always trying to protect their children, no matter how old they are."

"He loved it here."

“I know, sweetheart. Bobby was an excellent business manager. He did very well for us, even when he moved to Houston.”

“I never understood why he left.”

“He had his reasons.”

Billie studied Gran’s expression. “Oh my God. He did it for me, didn’t he?”

“You have to understand. Back then there wasn’t much opportunity for a young person in Hawthorn.” She took her hand. “They wanted you to give you the world.”

“But they gave up what they loved.”

Gran leaned over and kissed her forehead. “No, they didn’t.” She patted her hand. “Tell me about you and Harlan?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you get on?”

“Yes. I admit Harlan is very nice,” she looked at Gran and smiled, “for a Boone. We saw Blue Bonnet and her foal.”

Gran closed her eyes and smiled. “Ah, new life. It’s one of the things I love most about this place. Life is always renewing itself.”

“Harlan told me about the ranch. I had no idea the extent of the operation. I don’t know how you expect me to take over. I’m not strong like you. I know I’ve been a disappointment to you. I never married. I never had children. I never wrote my book. All I ever did was edit other people’s work.”

Gran put her arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. “You are strong. You’ve been knocked down but you keep getting up. That’s true strength.” Gran pulled her face to her. “You listen to me, Wilhelmina. You are my heart. I love you. You have a kind and generous spirit. I want you to always remember, I am very proud of you.”

Tears poured down her cheeks. “I don’t want to lose you.”

She held Billie close and let her weep. "Billie, angel, I want you to listen to me." She grabbed a tissue from her night stand and wiped her eyes. "I know this is going to be very hard on you. Reach out for help when you need it. That's not a show of weakness. That's a show of wisdom. No one can do everything on their own. Still, there will be days when you think you can't do it. On the days you can't do it for yourself, I want you to do it for me. Can you promise me that?"

"I'll try, Gran," she whispered through her tears.

She gave her a tight hug. "That's all I ask." She kissed her forehead. "Billie, my time here is coming to an end but I will never be truly gone." She touch her heart. "I'm a part of you. You will carry me with you forever. That gives me great joy."

Billie laid her head on her Gran's lap, just as she had as a little girl, and cried.

Billie woke with the headache that comes from too much crying and too much sleep. She looked around at the bedroom of a thirteen year old girl. Gran and Mom had gone into Hawthorn to get the furniture. They had declared that just because she was around cowboys didn't mean she had to live like one. She looked at the clock and bolted upright. It was half past nine. She dashed into the bathroom and gasped at the sight of her in the mirror. Her eyes were still red and puffy. She pulled her hair into a high ponytail and jumped in the shower. A few minutes of steam had helped her puffy eyes. She dressed quickly and ran toward Gran's room. She stopped when she her laughter coming from the kitchen. Sophie was making pancakes and Gran was sitting at the table eating a piece of bacon.

"Gran?"

"Good morning, dear."

"Sophie, why didn't you wake me?"

"Miss Willa said to leave you sleep," she said as she set what appeared to be a second stack of hotcakes in front of her grandmother. She watched as she covered the stack in syrup."

"Gran, really?"

"It's not like I need to worry about my cholesterol."

Billie didn't want to laugh, but she couldn't help it." She kissed her on the cheek.
"Oh Gran, I love you."

"I know dear," she smiled. "Now sit and have some of these before I eat them all."

Sophie had just sat down to join them when there was a knock at the door. "I'll get it," she said. She came back into the kitchen with Harlan in tow.

"Good morning, Harlan."

"Good morning, Miss Willa." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "How are you doing this morning?"

"I'm still here. Sit and have some hotcakes."

“I’ve already had breakfast but I wouldn’t mind helping myself to some coffee.”

Billie noticed how comfortable Harlan seemed in Gran’s kitchen. He must have spent a lot of time here. He joined them at the table and added sugar to the strong coffee.

“How’s Cody doing?” asked Gran.

“He’s doing well, thank you. He’s a natural trainer.”

“That’s good.” She took another piece of bacon from the tray. “Do you have to run off?”

“No, Cody’s got everything covered.”

“Why don’t you and Billie go for a ride?”

“What?” asked Billie. “Gran, I’m here to spend time with you.”

“I know dear, but you can’t spend all your time cooped up in here with me. Go get some fresh air. You’re both dressed for it.” She put her hand over Billie’s. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere today.”

“I’m game if you are,” he grinned. “That is if you still remember how.”

Billie set down her fork. “I believe I still can recognize which end of the horse I’m looking at.” Sophie suppressed a laugh. Gran did not.

Thirty minutes later they were trotting up a path toward an open field. Billie glanced over at Harlan and smiled. Then she pushed her heels into her horse's side and took off. She grinned as he tried to catch up to her. She pushed Daisy toward the back creek that marked the line between their two properties. She pulled up and dismounted, leading Daisy to take a drink. Harlan dismounted Charger and led him to where he could get a drink.

"I guess you do remember which end of the horse is which," he smiled.

"It's been a while but I remember." They tied their horses to a tree then walked toward the creek and sat down at the edge. "There's something else I remember."

"What's that?"

"You."

"What?" he smiled. "I thought you didn't remember me 'after all this time'.

"I remember that day. I remember seeing this skinny cowboy standing on the roof."

He smiled and tapped his stomach. "No so much anymore."

She looked at him and grinned. "No so bad. When you came down the ladder and I gave you that soda, well, I remembered I giggled like a kid."

"You were adorable." He loved her blush.

"How come you went away?"

"I needed to see what else was in the world. I wanted something for myself that wasn't the ranch and the family. Does that make any sense?"

"It does. Were your parents upset when you left?"

He smiled when he thought about the talks he'd had with his parents. "I think they knew the only way to keep me was to let me go."

"You came back."

“Yeah,” he smiled. “I spent some time traveling after law school. I enjoyed it but it none of it was home. I came back and started a small practice in Hawthorn, mostly with the ranches in the area.”

“You got married.”

He stopped at the thought of his wife. It had been so long. “Yes. I met Kathy not long after I got back to town. She was a trainer at Grey Farm. We got married and had Cody pretty quick.”

“I bet your parents were pleased.”

He chuckled. “They were besides themselves. We had to rein them in from spoiling him rotten.” He stared out at the water. This creek had never changed. Smooth, easy flow. Just a few rocky spots, but that’s where you could cross over.

“What happened?” she whispered.

“Cancer. It hit hard and fast. Kathy was only thirty-five. Cody was a junior in high school and he took it really hard. He enlisted in the army right after graduation.”

“Were you okay with that?”

“I was scared for him, of course. He was deployed to Afghanistan. I thought at the time it was what he needed.” Harlan was startled when she covered his hand with hers.

“And now?”

“He had his problems coming back.”

“PTSD?”

Harlan nodded. “He goes to therapy and he’s getting better.” He shook his head and blinked back tears. “What hurts most is as a parent you want to fix everything for your kid.”

“You can’t fix this.”

“You sound like you know.”

Billie nodded and looked out at creek and spoke softly. "I have this thing."

Harlan curled his fingers through hers. "You can tell me."

"Yeah, I think I can." She gave him a sad smile. "All my life I've had this thing. It's like a cloud that follows me around. Sometimes it pulls me in and I feel like I can't breathe. Then it's all I can do just to get out of bed. My mother knew. She understood. She could help me refocus. When all else failed she held me and loved me until my day got better." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "When she died three years ago, I lost my tether. I was okay for a while but eventually it was too much. Gran wanted me to come stay with her but I couldn't. I knew it wouldn't be enough."

He could see how hard this was for her. "It's okay, Billie. You can tell me."

"Last year I was considering a permanent solution to my problem. I wanted it all to stop. But I couldn't do it. Not to me or to Gran. So I checked into the hospital, the psych ward. It was two months of therapy and medication before I was released."

"That's why you're afraid you can't handle the ranch."

"Yesterday when we came back from our walk, I felt like I was drowning. I was on the phone with my therapist for an hour."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

She smiled. "She said she thought I was doing okay. This is a difficult situation for anyone. I assured her I was taking my medication and she gave me the name of a local therapist."

"I have to agree with her," he said. "You remind me an awful lot of your grandmother."

"Oh, I'm nowhere near as strong as she is."

"Yes you are. You recognized you needed help and you sought it out. That says strength to me."

"Thanks, Harlan."

“You won’t have to run this place alone. You have a great, trustworthy team in place. Once you get your bearings, I think you’ll be great for Kilbourne Ranch.”

“And you’ll be here?” she smiled.

He smiled and nodded. “For whatever you need.”

“Harlan, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“That day, when you were on the roof...” She shook her head. “Never mind I’m being ridiculous.”

“Tell me.”

“When you looked at me that day, it felt almost like you weren’t looking at me like I was a kid. Am I remembering right?”

Harlan smiled. “Yeah, you are. I thought you were the prettiest girl I’d ever seen. You still are.” Billie leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. Thirty-five years was worth the wait.

Harlan walked into his house and tossed down his keys. He hung up his hat on the rack next to Cody's.

"Yo, Cody!"

"In here, Dad."

He walked into the kitchen to find his son scooping out food for his German Shepard. The dog was so large he could have easily helped himself to the bag but he was so well trained he never would. The dog turned toward him and woofed a greeting. He walked over and rubbed the dog's head. "Hey, Blitz, buddy. How you doing?"

"He's happy he's about to eat. How about your son getting some attention?"

Harlan laughed and ruffled his son's hair. "Hey, Cody, buddy. How you doing?"

"Ha, ha, Dad." Cody placed the large bowl of food in its assigned spot. Blitz focused his attention on his dinner.

"Seriously, how are you?"

"I'm okay. Blitz and I had a good run today. I think we'll both sleep well tonight."

"That's good." He watched Cody put away the food bag and thought of his son as the carefree boy he used to be. With everything that was going on Billie and Miss Willa it made him do a lot of thinking. He wasn't known for pouring his heart out. Maybe that should change, at least a little. "Son, I know things haven't been easy for you but I want you to know that I will do whatever I can, get you whatever you need to make things better for you."

"I know, Dad. You got me Blitz."

He stepped closer and put his hand on his shoulder. "I hope you know that I couldn't love you more and that I'm very proud of who you are."

Cody gave him a hug. "I do know, Dad. I've always known."

"Good, good," he said quickly, patting his back. "What are we doing for dinner? I doubt Blitz will share."

“How about some spaghetti? I think we’ve got some garlic bread.”

“Sound good.” Thirty minutes later, they were sitting down to a not half bad effort of pasta and salad. Blitz was asleep in the corner.

“How is Miss Willa doing?”

“She seems herself. We had a nice chat.”

“She must be happy to have her granddaughter home.”

“She is. But Billie is taking it hard. They’re very close.”

“I’ve never met her. What’s she like?”

Harlan couldn’t contain his smile. “Feisty, like Miss Willa. Strong, stronger than she thinks. She’ll need to be to get through this.”

“Is she going to keep the place? I ran into Henry in town. He didn’t say anything but he seems concerned.”

“She’s going to give it a go. I told her we’d be there to help her.”

“Sure, Dad,” he grinned.

“What?”

“You haven’t stopped smiling since you starting talking about her.”

“I have not.”

“Have so. I may not have met her but I’ve seen her picture at Miss Willa’s. She’s not bad looking,” he shrugged. “For a woman her age.”

“For a woman her age? Are you blind? You saw her pic...” he stopped when he saw Cody’s shoulder’s quivering up and down. “Very funny.”

“Sorry. I couldn’t resist.” He set down his fork. “Seriously, Dad. I haven’t seen you act like this about a woman, since well, since ever.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to, your mother and I...”

“Dad, it’s okay. I know you loved Mom.”

Harlan glanced down and reached for his iced tea. “I did, very much.”

“Do you like her?”

“Billie?” He found himself smiling. “Yeah, I do.”

“Well, it’s about time?”

“What?”

“You’ve been alone a long time. You deserve to find someone.”

“Oh yeah?” he grinned.

“Yeah.”

“Eat your spaghetti.”

Billie found Sophie in the kitchen getting dinner ready. "Hi Sophie, how is she?"

"She seems a bit tired, not that she'd admit it."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"She wouldn't let me."

"Is she lying down?"

"No, she's in the den. Said she want to look through some pictures. I pulled out a couple of those scrapbooks, the last few. You Kilbournes seem to have a penchant for the things. There must be a hundred of them."

"I'll go see to her. Let us know about dinner."

"Miss Willa requested my chicken and biscuits."

Billie walked into the den and saw Gran seating on the sofa covered with an afghan, a large leather-bound book perched on her lap. She was running her finger over one of the pictures and smiling. "Gran, what are you looking at?"

"Oh, Billie. You're back. It's a picture of my Robert." She glanced down and smiled. "He was so handsome." She kissed her fingertip and touched the face. Billie sat down next to her and peered over her shoulder.

"He was so young. I don't remember him like that."

"I do," she smiled. She closed the book and set it on the coffee table next to the others. She pointed to the wall of bound books. "Kilbournes have been keeping these since they first arrived from England. These people, all of them, are your family." She took Billie's hand in hers. "Look into their faces. You will see yourself. Each one is a part of you."

Billie was surprised by her intense stare. "I will, Gran."

"Good," she smiled. "Now tell me about your ride with Harlan."

“It was very nice. We rode out to the creek and we sat by the edge and talked.”

“About what?”

“He told me about his wife and his son.”

“Cody’s a good boy, like his father. Had his troubles, though.”

“He told me. And I told him about what happened to me, is happening.”

Gran held her hand tight. “That’s good. What did he say?”

“He said I sounded strong because I knew when to ask for help.” She looked at Gran and grinned. “He also said I reminded him of you.”

“Hah! Clever man! He’s a good one, that Harlan.”

“Yes, Gran, you were right, once again. Harlan is a good man, kind and thoughtful.”

“Of course, I’m right. Almost always am. Now what else did you talk about?”

“We talked about the first time we met.”

“The first time?”

Billie sat back against the couch. “Are you telling me there is something Wilhelmina Kilbourne doesn’t know about?”

“I’m not all know and all seeing, child.”

“Close enough.”

“True. Continue.”

“I was visiting for the summer when I was fifteen. It was right after that terrible storm. I saw him standing on the roof of the barn. He looked...well...,” she grinned. “I was young and he looked like a cowboy. He came down the ladder and he looked overheated so I got him a cold drink and a towel. He tipped his hat and said “Thank you, ma’am.” I just giggled like a school girl and ran off.”

“You were a school girl.”

Billie smiled. “He has that funny, lopsided smile and his eyes are so blue. He made me feel so flustered.”

“And now?” Gran smiled.

“He still does.”

“Does he remember this meeting?”

Billie could feel her blush. “Yes,” she said quietly.

“And...details, girl!”

“Gran! You sound like a school girl yourself!”

“Tell me what he said.”

She sighed at the memory and smiled. “He said he thought I was the prettiest girl he’d ever seen.” She looked at Gran and decided to share. “He also said that hasn’t changed.”

“Yes! I knew it! I knew it the way he looked at you.”

“Gran! Did you set this up?”

She smiled and put up her hands. “I just suggested the ride. The rest was completely up to the two of you. So...there’s more I can see it.”

Billie’s blush got warm. “I kissed him.”

“Did he kiss you back?”

“He did.” She leaned close. “He’s an excellent kisser.” They were both giggling when Sophie walked into the den.

“Ah...excuse me? Dinner is ready.”

They had a wonderful dinner, laughing and telling stories. Gran finally admitted it was time for her to get some rest. Billie helped her to her room and into her nightgown. She got into bed and Billie tucked the covers around her. “This was a good day, Gran.”

“The best, dear.”

She sat down on the edge of the bed. “Gran, Harlan told me that he and Cody will help me, you know, after.

“They will, dear. They’re both good men.”

“I don’t know what I should do. How am I going to keep the ranch running the way you want?” Gran took her hand.

“Billie, my angel, I want you to make this place what you want. That’s what I love about the ranch, it’s always changing, always renewing itself. First it was farming, then cattle, some oil before they finally settled on horses. Make this place what you want. If you do that, then I will be smiling from heaven. I promise you.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will.”

Billie took a breath, trying to calm herself. She didn’t want to spoil what had been a perfect day with tears. “Gran, I don’t have the words to explain how much I love you.”

“You don’t need words, my girl. I know. I’ve always known.”

Harlan followed the smell of coffee into the kitchen. Cody handed him a mug. "Ah, bless you, my child."

"What are you up to today?"

"I thought I'd do some work on a couple of contracts before checking in with Billie."

"Billie is it?" Cody smiled.

"What are you doing today?"

"After Blitz and I take a run I'm going to work with Trapper. He's still a bit skittish."

"You'll work it out. You always do." His phone rang and he was startled at the caller ID. "Sophie?"

"Mr. Harlan, you need to come." Her voice was rough and shaky.

"I'll be right there." He pushed back from the table and stood.

"Miss Willa?"

Harlan nodded. "I'll call you when I can."

Ten minutes later he was pulling up in front of the house. Sophie was waiting at the front door, red eyed with tissues in her hand. "Miss Billie found her this morning. She's in her bedroom." She led him down the long hall to Miss Willa's room. He opened the door and saw Billie sitting on the edge of her grandmother's bed, holding her hand.

"She's cold," she whispered. "She needs another blanket."

Harlan found another quilt and the foot of the bed and stretched it out over Miss Willa. He gently pulled Billie back. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I came in to wake her for breakfast. She...she..." she started to gasp and the damn broke. He pulled her up into his arms while she sobbed. He held her closed and kissed her forehead while she cried herself out. He grabbed some tissues from the nightstand and dried her eyes.

“Come on, sweetheart. Let’s go to the kitchen and sit.”

“I can’t leave her.”

“You aren’t leaving her. We need to make some calls.”

She got a panicked look. “Oh God! Harlan, they’re not going to do stuff to her, are they? They can’t.”

“I’ll call Dr. Burns. He’ll take care of things. I’ll talk with him.”

“You’ll make sure?”

“I promise.” He walked Billie out to Sophie who set her down with a mug of warm tea.

“I have her, Mr. Harlan. You do what you need to do.”

Mike Burns had been Miss Willa’s doctor for twenty years. He got a promise out of him to do what was only absolutely necessary. He assured Harlan that with Willa’s extreme age and heart condition that at most they would do a blood test. A full autopsy would not be necessary. Mike would call an ambulance and he would come with it to the ranch. He called Cody and told him he’d be with Billie for the bulk of the day. When he got to the kitchen, he found Billie with her hands wrapped around the mug and shivering. She was chalk pale and he was afraid she was going into shock.

“Billie, I’ve made the calls.” He looked up at Sophie. “Will Henry be in yet?”

“I expect so.”

“I should go tell him. He can tell the men.”

“No. I’ll do it. Miss Billie needs you.”

Harlan nodded. Billie was now Miss Billie. “Thank you, Sophie.” He took Billie’s hand and tried to warm it. He remembered the afghan in the front room. “Can you come with me?” She stood and followed. He took a look in the hall closet and found a hoodie. He slipped it on her and zipped it up. He sat her down on the couch and covered her with the afghan. “Is that better?”

Billie gave him a sad smile. "Yes, thank you." She glanced out the window. "They're coming for her."

"Yes, sweetheart, they are."

She looked at him and he could tell she was struggling, but she was coming out of her initial shock. "Yesterday was a perfect day. She sent us on that ride on purpose."

"She did?"

"She said she could see the way you looked at me." She chuckled. "I told her how we kissed on the bank. She was so happy."

"Hah! Miss Willa sure was something."

"She sure was. She told me about all the scrapbooks and how they were family. I should look at the faces because they were a part of me. At dinner we talked for hours. She told me all about the men and all their stories. She knew every one of them." She stared off for a moment. "She told me that I shouldn't think of what she would do with the ranch. She told me to make it mine. She said that would make her happy."

"That sounds like her."

"We also talked about how you'd promised to help me." She gave him a soft kiss. "You're keeping your promise."

"Always, sweetheart. Always."

They saw the lights but they came without sirens. A small sedan pulled in behind Harlan's car. Mike Burns got out and led the EMT's toward the house. Harlan opened the door to them. "Mike, thanks for coming so quickly. This is Billie Kilbourne."

Mike extended his hand. "Ms. Kilbourne, I'm terribly sorry for your loss. Your grandmother was a remarkable woman."

"Thank you, Dr. Burns."

He covered her hand with his. "And don't you worry. She will not be left alone." Billie wiped a tear from her cheek as she whispered another thank you.

“Mike, I’ll show you where. Billie, please sit. I won’t be long.” He got her covered with the afghan and led Mike and the EMT’s down the hall. “Mike, I’m worried about Billie. She and Miss Willa were extremely close and she’s taking it very hard.”

“I’ll take a look at her before we go.”

“Thanks.” He opened Ms. Willa’s door and left them to their work. Harlan returned to Billie’s side and pulled her close. It was all he could think to do. A few minutes later Mike joined them.

“We’re almost finished. Everything is as I would have expected. It looks like she passed peacefully in her sleep.”

“That’s good,” Billie whispered.

“Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to take a look at you. You’re a little pale.”

Billie looked at Harlan. “Please, sweetheart. For me.” She nodded and Mike took her pulse and listened to her heart. He reached into his bag and pulled out a small packet. He made a note on it and handed it to her.

“Your readings are elevated but understandable considering the situation. I took the precaution of bringing this with me. It’s a mild sleeping pill.”

“Oh, I can’t. I take an antidepressant.”

He nodded. “Thank you for telling me. Normally, no you wouldn’t but this is a very mild pill and there are only five in here. Just enough so you can get some sleep over the next few days. If you have any problems, Harlan has my direct number. Feel free to call me any time.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

“Thanks, Mike.”

An EMT appeared in the doorway. “Dr. Burns, we’re ready.” He nodded and they moved the gurney to the main hall. There lay Wilhelmina Kilbourne, covered and ready for her final journey. Harlan helped Billie to her feet. She ran her hand over the hospital blanket.

“Could I?” she asked.

“Of course,” said Mike

Billie’s hand shook as he pulled the blanket from her face. She touched her cheek and gave it a final kiss. “I promise, Gran. When I can’t do it for me, I’ll do it for you. I love you.” She looked up and nodded. “It’s okay now.”

“Wait, Miss Billie. There’s something you need to see.” Sophie had returned through the back entrance. She pointed out the window at the long driveway. Ten men on horseback were lining up on either side of the driveway.

“What’s going on?” Billie asked.

“They’re saying goodbye.”

Harlan held tight to Billie as they stood on the porch and watched the ambulance slowly make its way past the honor guard. Each man bowed his head as Miss Willa let Kilbourne Ranch for the last time. “Wow,” he whispered. When the ambulance was out of sight the men moved down and lined up in front of the porch. Each man nodded to Billie as they had to Miss Willa.

“What’s happening?” she whispered.

“I think they’re showing their respect to you.” He felt Billie’s back stiffen and shoulders straighten.

“Thank you, all of you,” she said with a forced strength. “The respect you’ve shown my grandmother and to me means more than I can say.” She nodded toward Henry on the lead horse. “I will keep Henry informed of all the arrangements and he will keep all of you informed. I know I can rely on all of you for the support I’ll need in the days and weeks ahead. Thank you.” She nodded and Harlan helped her back into the front room.

“That was very well done, Billie. Your grandmother would be very proud.” He kissed her cheek. “I certainly am.” Billie’s knees buckled and he caught her before she hit

the ground. He got her back to the sofa as Sophie brought her a glass of water. She took a few sips and handed her back the glass.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“That’s enough for now. You need to lie down. Come on, I’ll help you up the stairs.” Harlan held her around the waist as she held on to the railing.

“I’m in the back.”

He led her down the hall to the open door. If he wasn’t so worried about her, he’d have noticed he was in the bedroom of a teenage girl. He pulled back the covers and tucked her in. “I’ll go get the pills.”

“No, please. Stay.”

“Of course, sweetheart. Whatever you want.” He walked toward the arm chair in the corner.

“No, please,” She patted the bed. “Would you stay here? I would really like it if you could hold me.”

Harlan nodded and kicked off his boots. He pulled back the covers and laid down next to her. Billie curled up against his chest as he pulled her tight.

“Thank you for keeping your promise,” she whispered.

“Always, sweetheart. Always.”

Billie woke to find herself still wrapped in Harlan's arms and looked up at him. She could have never imagined a man like him. Her first instinct was not to trust him. He was a Boone, after all. Gran set her straight. She said Billie could trust him and she was right. Harlan Boone was a man of his word. The chiseled jaw and killer blue eyes were a wonderful bonus. His eyes fluttered open. "Hey there."

"Hi. How are you feeling?"

"I could use some aspirin and a shower but other than that I think I'm okay."

He rubbed his hand up her back. "I'm glad." She started to chuckle. "What?"

"A Boone and a Kilbourne in bed together. Who'd have thought it?"

"Who'd have thought," he smiled.

"Thank you for this, for staying with me." She leaned down and gave him a soft kiss. What she meant for only a moment melted into more. The kiss grew deeper until Harlan pulled back.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I got carried away."

"Why are you sorry? I started it." She tried to get out of bed but he stopped her.

"Sweetheart, no, wait. Believe me, there is nothing I want more than to keep kissing you." He threaded his fingers through hers. "I want for us to figure out what this thing is between us but I don't think today is the day for it."

She sat back and smiled. "You're right, of course. Just so you know, that's really annoying." She gave him a quick kiss. "I'm going to grab a shower. Do you want to get some coffee?"

"That'll be great but..." he glanced down and blushed. "I'm going to need a minute."

For the first time that day, Billie laughed.

Billie felt much better after her shower. She walked downstairs and heard Sophie and Harlan talking in the kitchen. “Hey.”

“Hi, Miss Billie. Are you ready for some food? I’ve made some chicken salad.”

She put a hand on her stomach. “That growling tells me yes. Thank you.” She took a seat next to Harlan and he reached for her hand.

“Do you think you can talk about some details?”

“Yes, I’m okay now.”

“Good. Your grandmother set everything into place and I do mean everything. The funeral home, the services, even the menu from the caterer.”

“I could have taken care of that,” said Sophie.

“I’m sure you could have but there will be a couple of hundred people here. I’m sure she didn’t want to put you through it,” said Harlan.

“The service will be Saturday, so we have two more days. She wanted a viewing in the front room. We’ll have to move the furniture out. I’m sure the men will help with that. The minister has a podium. The funeral home will make sure the plot next to your grandfather is ready.”

“It sounds like I don’t have anything to do,” she said quietly.

“Sweetheart, you know what your grandmother was like. She wanted to make sure things would be just what she wanted. This is going to be a busy day. You’ll be making sure all Miss Willa’s wishes are carried out.”

“Sophie, I’m sure I can count on you to work with the caterers and wait staff to make sure things go smoothly,” said Billie.

She smiled as she set a plate of chicken salad in front of her. “Of course, Miss Billie.” She set a plate in front of Harlan. “I’ll let the two of you finish. If you don’t mind, I’m going to...I need to get to the laundry.” She moved toward the door but Billie stood.

“Sophie, it can wait.” She pulled her into a hug. “I know you loved her too.”

Sophie wept on her shoulder. "I did. She was so kind. I'll miss her so much."

"I know, dear. We all will. This has been a rough day. Why don't you go take a rest in your room. Harlan and I will clean up and I'm sure we'll be able to fend for ourselves for the rest of the day. Go get some rest. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you. I will." Sophie nodded as she left the kitchen.

Billie sat back down and tasted her chicken salad. "Umm, this good and I'm starving." She noticed Harlan smiling. "What?" He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"You're going to do great."

They cleaned up in the kitchen and took their sweet teas to the den. Billie looked up at the wall of scrap books. "I can't believe it's been less than a day when Gran and I were looking through these. So much has changed."

Harlan rubbed his hand up her back. "I know."

"She told me to look through them. They were my family. I guess there's no time like the present." She reached for the first book and sat together on the couch. "Look at that," she said as she touched the gold leaf title. "1864 to 1900."

"Lincoln was still president when this was started."

She opened the book and started looking through the pages. There were news clippings from the local paper, detailing new residents to town, cattle sales and theft of a prize chicken. The first photos appeared about 1880. "Oh, look. It's Silas and Mary Kilbourne."

"It looks like a wedding picture. I bet they never could have imagined what would happen with the ranch."

"I don't know," Harlan smiled. "Silas looks pretty determined."

"Apparently," Billie chuckled. "These are the Kilbourne children. All eight of them."

He pointed to a small girl sitting in her mother's lap. "That must be Emma."

“Poor girl. She barely had a chance.”

“At least she knew what it was to be loved.”

Billie smiled. “I didn’t know you were such a romantic.”

“Given the right inspiration,” he grinned.

She flipped the page and felt her heart stop. She read the inscription. “Emma Kilbourne 1889.” She could have been looking at a picture of herself at age fifteen. “Oh my God, Harlan. She looks just like me.”

“That she does.”

Nothing could have prepared her for what was on the next page. “Emma Kilbourne and Josiah Boone, Christmas dance, 1889.” She looked at Harlan who appeared equally stunned. It was the image of him at eighteen.

“Whoa,” he whispered.

“This is crazy.” She set the book down on the coffee table. “It’s creepy.”

“Not really,” he said. “Think about it. Josiah was my four times great grandfather. Emma was your four times great aunt. A family resemblance is normal.”

“Resemblance? It looks like we posed at one of those old time photo booths. She saw this. Gran saw this and that’s why she thought we should be together.”

Harlan closed the book and took her hands. “Billie, even if that’s true,” he smiled, “and knowing Miss Willa, it probably is. Even if it is true what does that mean to us? I know I’ve always thought about the pretty girl I met thirty five years ago. I know I can’t stop thinking about the beautiful woman I’m getting to know.”

Billie smiled. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Even if this is a setup?”

“If it is, it took one hundred and thirty years to put together.”

Harlan grabbed a cup of coffee and sat at his kitchen table with the paper. Miss Willa's death had pushed all other news below the fold. There was a picture from the last county fair. The story detailed her history and the long history of the Kilbournes in Hawthorn.

"Morning, Dad."

"Morning. What are you up to today?"

"Nothing special, why?"

"Billie Kilbourne will be here to go over the estate. I thought you'd like to meet her."

"Count on it," he grinned as he grabbed an orange from the bowl on the table.

He gave his son his patented no mischief glare. "What are you planning?"

"Nothing. I just want to meet the woman who has you so turned around."

Harlan sat back and smiled. "She really does."

"I'm glad, Dad, really."

"Thanks."

Harlan got the same rush when Billie opened the front door today as he had that first day all those years ago. She was smiling and looked rested. He mentally chastised himself for admiring how well her jeans fit over her slim hips. Billie was still in mourning. "Good morning," he said as he kissed her cheek.

"You know I could have driven myself. You didn't have to pick me up."

He touched his finger to the brim of his hat. "What kind of Texan would I be if I didn't offer a lady a ride?"

"Cowboy code?" she grinned.

"Something like that."

“As it turns out, I’m glad you did. I want to show you something.” She grabbed a jacket and walked out toward the first paddock. “Take a look.”

Harlan’s heart raced. The horse in the paddock was dancing around, kicking up his hoofs and running back and forth. The horse was jet black with his long mane and tail blowing in the breeze.

“How’s he doing, Henry? Billie shouted.

“He’s great, Miss Billie. Lightning loves nothing better than a good kick of his heels.”

“Lightning?” asked Harlan.

“Black Lightning. The sixth, I think. A direct descendant of the original. Isn’t he beautiful?”

He couldn’t stop staring. “That is the most beautiful horse I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Billie pulled some papers out of her jacket. “He’s yours.”

“What?”

“He’s yours. Sophie gave me a letter this morning that Gran left. It was about you.”

“About me?”

“Yes. She said when she tried to make you a bequest but you wouldn’t hear of it.”

“That’s right and I still won’t.”

“Will you let me finish?” she smiled.

“I’m sorry.”

“She said that ever since my father and my grandfather died, you were the one man she would count on most. You were her rock.”

“She did?”

“She did.” She pulled a letter out of the envelope and began to read.” She said, ‘He was my true friend. I don’t know what I would have done without him. He was my

rock. He's also as stubborn and thick headed as one." Harlan chuckled but waved for her to continue. "I want Harlan to have Black Lightning but I'm not giving him the horse. I'm selling him for the sum of one dollar, with, of course, consideration for a reduced rate on any future stud fees."

He laughed out loud. "That is so Willa! She may have been elderly but she was sharp as a tack."

Billie smiled and held out her hand. "So, cowboy, you got a dollar?"

He reached into his pocket and peeled a dollar off a small group of bills. "Who am I to deny Miss Willa?" He handed her the dollar and she handed him the horse's papers. "Billie, I can't believe you're doing this. That horse is worth six figures."

"At least," she smiled as she tucked the dollar in her jeans. "But who am I to deny Gran's wishes?" She waved Henry over and he brought the horse to them. Billie rubbed her hand over the horse's nose. "Say hello to your new person, Lightning."

Harlan ran his hand down the horse's muscled neck. "Hello, boy."

"He's pretty high spirited, Mr. Harlan."

"Cody can handle him."

Henry smiled. "He couldn't be going to a better stable. The boys have the trailer ready. Let me just get him cleaned up." Henry took Lightning back to his stall for a rubdown while they waited in the front office. He joined them a few minutes later. "Tommy is brushing him down. It won't be long."

Harlan couldn't stop grinning and took Billie's hand. "I can't believe you're doing this."

"It's what Gran wanted. It's what I want too." They heard a car pull up a little too fast for the gravel drive. Out the window he could see a man getting out of a black Cadillac. He was tall with styled dark hair and wearing a dark blue suit and tie. The man walked into the office and noticed his presence. The man also noticed Billie and Harlan didn't like it.

“Henry, here’s the check, what time can I expect delivery?”

Henry took the check and looked at it before he put it in his desk. “We’re going to be delayed.”

“That’s not acceptable. You said Saturday.”

“That’s before our owner, Miss Willa, died. Saturday’s the funeral.”

“And you all have to go?”

“Yes, we do, Mr. Baker.” Henry looked toward Billie as if to introduce her. Harlan caught her slight shake of the head. He turned back to the man. “Monday is the earliest we can deliver Rio.”

“Fine, but I should get a discount for having to wait.”

“This is Kilbourne Ranch, not the discount bin at Costco.” The man turned on his heels and left.

“Who the hell is he?” asked Billie.

“He bought one of our two-year olds, Rio.”

“Do you know him?”

“Not really. I only met him when he came out to inspect the horse. Everything else was done on line.”

“Don’t cash the check.”

“Billie?” Harlan asked.

“I’d don’t like him. Something doesn’t feel right. That’s not a horse guy. Who wears a suit to a ranch? Look into him. Find out where he’s taking this horse.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And from now on, unless you know a client or they are referred by someone you know, we deep dive anyone who wants one of our horses. I’m not sending them into a bad situation. They deserve the best.”

Henry nodded. "Of course, but we signed a contract."

Billie smiled at Harlan. "I'm sure you can handle that."

Harlan drove up to the road past his house toward the first stable. He parked and they got out. "Come on, I'll introduce you." He walked into the stable and emitted a high-pitched whistle. "Cody!" Cody and Blitz walked out of a stall and locked it behind him.

"I'm not deaf," he smiled. He walked toward them and extended his hand. "You must be Miss Billie. It's very nice to meet you. I'm really sorry about Miss Willa."

"Thank you, Cody. Wow," she smiled as she looked between Cody and Harlan. "the nut doesn't fall from the Boone tree."

Cody smiled. "We get that a lot."

"Who is this handsome fella?"

"This is Blitz. Say hello to the nice lady."

"Woof!"

Billie scratched behind Blitz's ear. He held up his paw for a shake. "What a gentleman."

Henry stuck his head in the stable door. "You ready for us? Oh, hey Cody."

"Hi Henry. What's going on?"

"What until you see this," said Harlan. Cody and Blitz followed them into the drive where two of Henry's men were unloading Lightning. "Meet Black Lightning the sixth. He's a gift from Miss Willa and Miss Billie."

"Dear God," Cody gasped.

"Not a gift," Billie corrected. "You bought him."

"For a dollar."

"What?"

"My grandmother wanted your father to have him but she knew he would never accept a bequest." Lightning bucked against the lead as Cody slowly approached.

"Careful, Cody," said Henry. "He's pretty high strung."

“It’s okay,” he said quietly. “Isn’t it, boy.” The horse snorted but didn’t pull back. Cody slowly reached out and pet Lightning’s nose. “There you go, boy. Henry, I have an open stall. Can you and the guys give me a hand?”

“Sure, Cody.” Henry led Lightning behind Cody into the stable.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” said Billie. “Lightning seemed to calm right down for Cody.”

Harlan smiled. “He has a gift.”

Harlan opened the door to his office and Billie looked around.

"This is nice," she said. "It looks like you. Very male, but no swagger."

"You don't think I have any swagger?" he chuckled.

She gave him a grin that about melted his bones. "You don't need it."

He sat behind his desk and pulled out a large file. "Are you ready for this? We could wait until after the funeral."

Billie took up the seat opposite. "No, let's get it over with."

"Most of this is a lot of forms to sign. There's the life insurance, the title to the ranch, access to all the accounts." He turned the file toward her and she paged through as she signed at the arrows.

"This can't be right, can it?"

"What?"

"These amounts. What are these?"

"Those are the investment accounts. Your grandfather had a knack."

"A knack? This is crazy. I know you said millions but somehow, I thought that was a figure of speech, you know, like if I sold the ranch. I didn't think you were talking about money sitting in accounts."

"I know this might be a bit overwhelming."

"Harlan, that is a mastery of understatement. Before this I had a one-bedroom apartment in Houston. I made an adequate living as an editor and my parents left me enough for a comfortable retirement. I never imagined anything like this."

"I understand. Why don't we set this aside for the moment. There are a few bequests. To the church, to the town." He pulled out a stack of envelopes. "These are for the employees. Miss Willa wrote each of them a letter. She had me cut each of them a check for a year's salary. If you agree I thought we could give them out before the viewing."

“That sounds fine.”

He pulled the file back and put it in his briefcase. “I’ll file everything on Monday.”

“Are we done with the lawyer-client thing?” she asked as she stood.

Harlan stood and sat on the edge of his desk. “For now.” He took her hands in his. “What do you say we get out of here for a little while? We could go into town for lunch.”

“A change of scenery might be nice.”

“Roy’s still has the best barbeque.”

“Sold,” she grinned.

Billie hadn't been to Roy's for years. It was one of those places that never changed. They had the same checkered tablecloths, the same menus and apparently the same waitresses for the past few decades. A dark hair waitress in jeans and a Roy's t-shirt approached.

"Hey, Harlan. It's been a while."

"Hi, Dottie. This is Billie Kilbourne."

Billie extended her hand. "Hello. It's been a while for me too. I'm looking forward to some of Roy's barbeque."

"Kilbourne. Are you Miss Willa's granddaughter?"

"Yes, I am."

"I'm so sorry for her passing. She was a wonderful woman."

"Thank you, Dottie. I appreciate that."

"Will you be staying in Hawthorn?"

"Yes, I will."

Dottie gave her a genuine smile. "Good. I hope we'll see in here more often."

"Count on it," she smiled.

"What do you say, Harlan? A couple of specials?" Dottie asked.

"Billie?"

"Sounds great."

"Couple of beers?"

"Soda for me," said Billie.

"Same here."

Dottie brought them sodas in clear red plastic cups. Nothing had changed. "I take it you've been missed," Billie smiled.

“You know how it is in a small town. Everyone knows everyone’s business. The whole town will know you plan to stay on by dinner.”

“I’m sure it will.” She took a sip of her soda. “I take it they know about your love life too?”

“Or lack, thereof,” he smiled.

“You mean there aren’t a bevy of society ladies vying for your attention?”

Harlan laughed. “Hardly. What are you going to do about Houston?”

“Smooth transition, counselor,” she grinned. “I get it you don’t want to talk about your love life. Well, Houston. I took a leave from my job. I’ll call them soon and tell them it’s permanent. My apartment won’t take much to close up. I have a few things of my parents in storage but not much. I took care of most of that when I sold their house.”

He reached for her hand. “I’ll help you with that when you’re ready.”

“You are a good friend if you offer to help me move,” she smiled.

“Is there someone in Houston who would want you to stay?”

Billie sat back and smiled. “My grandmother already told you that I was unattached.”

Harlan gave her a sly grin. “Yeah, well...grandmothers don’t always know everything about their grandchildren.”

“This is my grandmother we’re talking about.”

“Point taken,” he smiled. “But I don’t understand why. You’re an amazing woman.”

“Thank you. I had a couple of relationships over the years but never long term. They just never seemed to be right.” Dottie returned to their table with two orders of short ribs and coleslaw. Billie took a bit of a sauce-soaked rib and sighed. “Oh, I’ve missed these.”

“Hawthorn does have its attractions,” he smiled.

Billie looked up from her plate and smiled. "I'd have to agree." She enjoyed their meal almost as much as she enjoyed an hour of not thinking about what was coming tomorrow.

Harlan was glad to have spent some time away from their ranches. They both needed a break. Tomorrow was going to be difficult for both of them. Billie opened the front door and set down her keys.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thanks. I’m good.” He glanced over his shoulder to see the front room had been set up for tomorrow. A glance through the back window saw a catering tent in the back yard. Billie took a quick look at the front room and turned away. He took her hands in his and moved her down the hall, out of sight of the folding chairs. “There will be plenty of time for that tomorrow.”

“You’re right,” she smiled.

“Where’s Sophie?”

“I told her to take the rest of the day off.” Billie slipped her arms around his neck. “Harlan, you know how we said we needed to figure out what this was between us?”

“Yes,” he smiled.

“Well, I’ve figured out enough, for now.” She pulled him tight for a passionate kiss. “Harlan, will you stay with me for a while?”

“Billie, are you sure?”

“We’ve waited thirty-five years. I think we’ve waited long enough.” She took him by the hand and he happily followed her up the stairs. She closed the bedroom door behind them and pulled him tight against her. He rubbed his hands down her sides and nipped at her neck. She smiled and stepped back. She kicked off her boots and slowly unbuttoned her blouse. Harlan was unable to move, barely able to think. She pulled off her jeans and all that remained was the smallest of lingerie.

“Holy...” Now it seemed like he’d lost the ability to speak. Billie Kilbourne had the body of a woman half her age. She grinned, understanding what affect she was having on him. She walked toward him and slipped her hands up his chest.

“You’re wearing far too many clothes, cowboy.” She began to undress him, slowly undoing the buttons on his shirt. She pushed the shirt off his shoulders and smiled as she ran her fingers down his bare chest. She replaced her fingers with her lips. He felt a growl rumble up in his chest and he picked Billie up in his arms. He tossed her on the bed and stripped off the rest of his clothes. He removed the rest of her lingerie and his breath quickened.

“Harlan, I need you,” she whispered.

If he could have spoken he would have told her how much he needed her and he was never going to let her go.

Billie sat in the kitchen and picked at the small Danish Sophie had insisted she eat. She was dressed and ready. The guests would arrive in about an hour. The employees had been asked to arrive early. They weren't the only ones who were early. The funeral director was in the front room with Gran. She couldn't go in there, not yet.

"Billie?"

She looked up to see Harlan standing in the doorway. He was wearing a jet-black suit and vest and was carrying a black Stetson. She'd never been more relieved to see anyone in her life. "Harlan," she whispered as she rose from the table and wrapped her arms around his waist.

He kissed the top of her head and whispered, "I'm here, sweetheart, I'm here."

She suddenly remembered they had an audience. "Sophie has some Danish. She made me eat one."

"Coffee, Mr. Harlan?"

"Yes, thank you, Sophie." She placed a plate with a Danish in front of him along with the coffee.

"You should eat something too." She pointed to Billie's plate. "You should finish, Miss Billie. You need something on your stomach." She looked at the two of them and smiled. "Can I assume the two of you are together now?"

"Yes, Sophie, we're together," Billie smiled.

"Hah! Miss Willa was right. She said she knew the minute she saw the two of you together that it was meant to be. She said it was written."

Harlan chuckled. "Miss Willa was right."

"Of course, she was," Sophie said as she went back to her to setting out plates of Danish.

She managed to finish half her Danish as Harlan finished his. "The men will be here shortly. Before they are," she reached for his hand and stood. "I need your help."

“Anything.”

“She’s in there, in the front room. I can’t go in, not alone.”

He kissed the top of her head. “We’ll do it together.” Harlan wrapped his arm around her shoulder as she held tight to his waist. They walked into the front room and Billie stopped at the sight of her the funeral director moving a flower arrangement. “Can we have a minute?”

“Of course, sir.” The director left them alone.

Billie edged up to Gran’s coffin. Her hair was brushed into her usual style. Her dress wasn’t black. It was a pretty violet with a lace collar. She’d worn the dress to church on Sundays. “She looks pretty, not too made up.”

“She had very specific instructions.”

“I’m sure she did.” Billie touched her soft grey hair. “Gran, I’m doing my best. You were right about Harlan. He’s everything you said he was. Kind and honest. Gran, you were right about everything.” She began to weep. Harlan took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped her eyes. He touched the edge of the coffin.

“You’d be so proud of her, Miss Willa. Your Billie is a strong girl, just like her grandmother. Pretty like her, too.”

Billie chuckled through her tears. “Let’s go wait for the men.”

Sophie escorted Tommy, the last of the men, into the den. "I'll be seeing to the caterers," she said.

"No, please. Sophie, please stay," said Harlan. He looked around room and saw the grief. All of these people loved Miss Willa as much as she loved them. "Before we start today..."

Billie reached for his arm. "This should come from me."

Harlan nodded and stood aside.

"First, I want to thank all of you for the help you've given me the last few days. I know I can depend on all of you in the coming weeks and months." She held out her hand to Harlan and he handed her the envelopes. "Gran told me about all of you. She may not have been as active the last few years but she knew every one of you. You aren't just employees, you're family." She began to hand out the envelopes. "She wrote each of you a letter along with a bequest." The Sophie and the men began to open the envelopes. There were a couple of gasps and one 'Holy shit!'

"Oh, Miss Billie, I'm sorry." Tommy blushed. "This is just so...unbelievable. I've only been here a year."

"Tommy, Gran told me about you. You and Becca are expecting a baby."

"Yes, ma'am. Any day now."

"Gran told me you were a nice boy and worked hard."

Henry patted Tommy's back and smiled. "He sure does."

"You all meant the world to her."

Henry stood and put his envelope in his jacket. "We'll get settled for the service. Thank you, Miss Billie."

"You're very welcome." Billie sighed and looked at Harlan. He nodded toward Sophie who was still looking at her letter. "Sophie? Are you okay?"

“This is so much. And this,” she held up the letter as she wiped her eyes. “I’m miss her so much already.”

Billie gave her a hug. “I know, I know.” Sophie passed Henry as he came back to the den.

“Miss Billie, can I have a minute?”

“Of course, Henry.”

“I wanted to let you know, I looked into that guy, Baker. I spoke with the sheriff’s office and they didn’t have anything on him. But then I got to thinking. There’s only one insurance company in the area that covers horses. I called our agent. Turns out Baker has the habit of buying horses that die under mysterious circumstances. The insurance company has had to pay out several large claims. They don’t have any proof but they have their suspicions. The agent says his stable is not adequate for the level of breeding he says he’s doing. I called Baker and told him we wouldn’t be selling him the horse and I messengered the check back. He was really pissed. I gave him your phone number, Mr. Harlan. I think you can expect a call on Monday.”

Harlan smiled. “I’ll be ready for him.”

“Oh, you should know that I put the word out. Baker won’t be able to buy a horse from a reputable ranch in all of Texas.”

Billie smiled. “Excellent work, Henry.”

“You too, ma’am,” he grinned.

“Thanks,” she smiled.

Harlan and Billie were left alone in the den. He gave her a quick kiss and pulled her into a hug. “I’m so proud of you.”

Harlan held Billie's hand as she sat stoically through the service. He was focusing on being strong for her rather than how much Miss Willa's death would affect him. Miss Willa thought he was just being kind to her after her husband died. The truth was being around Miss Willa was like having his own grandmother again. They enjoyed dinners together as she asked him about his work and about Cody. He glanced behind him and Cody nodded and put his hand on his shoulder. Cody understood.

After the service everyone gathered out front before the procession to the family graveyard. The funeral director gave the family a moment before the coffin was sealed. Billie spoke quietly to Miss Willa before walking with Sophie to the front hall. He took a moment to say his own goodbye. He stood before Miss Willa one last time. "I'll miss you," he whispered. He took his handkerchief from his jacket and wiped his eyes. He turned and saw Billie watching him. He walked toward her and she put her arms around his waist. He closed his eyes and wept on her shoulder.

Harlan stood next to Billie as she received all the guests as they entered the reception tent. He smiled as Cody walked into the tent. He looked a little pale dressed in a dark suit. He gave his son a hug. "Thank you for being here, son."

"Of course, Dad." Cody moved to Billie. "Hello, Miss Billie."

"Cody, thank you so much for being here. I really appreciate it."

"I really liked Miss Willa. She was a pistol."

"Yes, she was," she smiled. "Cody, I know you have a lot of responsibilities at your ranch. Responsibilities that can't get put on hold. If you need to leave, it's okay."

"Miss Billie..."

Billie took him by the shoulders. "Really, Cody. It's okay."

Cody nodded and looked at Harlan. "I do need to check on Lightning."

"Sure, son." Harlan watched Cody quickly left the tent. "Billie? What was that about?"

“He looked really uncomfortable. I wanted him to have an out.”

Harlan rubbed his hand up Billie’s back and kissed her cheek. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

Three hours later the last of the guests were sitting around telling stories and finishing off the rest of some excellent barbeque. Billie was looking tired and her smile was forced. He leaned in whispered. “Sweetheart, let’s get you out of here.”

“The guests?”

“Will make do without you. Come on. Let’s go to the house.”

Billie nodded and said goodbye to the rest of the guests. He followed her into the house. “How about you change into something comfortable. Then we can go to my place and relax.”

She sighed and smiled. “Sounds great.” She brushed her hand down the plain black shift. “I need to get out of this thing.” A few minutes later Billie came back down stairs in jeans and plain button shirt. She walked into the kitchen and found Sophie packing up food. “Sophie, most of the guests are gone. I’d appreciate it if you could shoo the rest of them out.”

“Sure thing, Miss Billie. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes. The dress on my bed.”

“Dry cleaners?”

“Burn it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As soon as they pulled up to his house and got out of the car, they were stopped by a barking Blitz. “Hey boy,” said Harlan. He tried to pet the dog but Blitz backed up and kept barking.

Billie came around the side of the car. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. He’s never like this.”

“Harlan, is Blitz a service dog?”

“Yes, he’s a support dog.”

“Oh God,” Billie gasped. “A service dog would never leave his person. Cody’s in trouble.”

Blitz kept barking and pacing back and forth, looking back then toward them. Harlan suddenly realized what Blitz was telling them. “The hayloft. Cody used to hide up there when he was a kid.” He started running toward the barn with Blitz leading the way. “Cody! Cody, where are you?” Blitz sat beneath the loft and looked up. There sat Cody, legs dangling over the edge. His tie was loosened and he was staring out the window. “Cody? Cody, talk to me.” Cody continued to stare out the window. Harlan climbed up the ladder and Billie followed. “Cody, son, can you talk to me?”

Billie sat down next to Cody and took his hand. “Cody, it’s me, Billie.” She took a breath and looked at Harlan. He nodded and she continued. “I need you to listen to me. I can’t pretend to understand what you’re feeling right now, but there is something I do understand. I understand what it’s like to get lost inside yourself.” Cody turned and looked at her. “I’ve had this thing all my life. When it catches up to me, I feel like I can’t make sense of anything. It’s like I’m swallowed up by a dark cloud. Last year it got really bad. I spent two months in Houston Psychiatric.”

“You did?” he whispered.

“I did. Two months of intensive therapy and the right med, which I take every day, and things are better now. But I know I have to live with this the rest of my life.”

Harlan watched as Billie connected with his son in a way he never could. Her eyes began to tear.

“I’m sorry if today was too much for you.”

“I thought I’d be okay but seeing Miss Willa brought it all back. My mom, then the men in my unit. There were so many. Once my mind goes there…”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s not your fault,” Cody quickly added. “You must know what it’s like. You never know what can set it off.”

“That’s true. Cody, I’m guessing you have an emergency number to call when it gets bad.”

“Yeah, I do. One of the guys in my group. How did you know?”

Billie smiled. “Because I have one too.”

Harlan put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “Cody, let’s go back to the house.”

Cody looked at him and Harlan could see he was connecting. “I’m sorry, Dad. I didn’t mean to scare you. I was just trying to get my thoughts sorted out.”

He pulled him into a hug. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

They all stood and started toward the ladder. “How did you find me?”

“Blitz. He’s been very concerned. He couldn’t get to you up in the loft. I guess he was sitting here until he heard my car. That’s when he came to get us.” As they got to the floor of the old barn, Blitz ran to Cody and jumped on him.

“I’m sorry, boy,” said Cody as he rubbed the dog’s back. “How long was I up there?”

“You left the reception about three hours ago.”

“Oh God,” he murmured as he buried his head in his dog’s neck. “I’m so sorry, boy.”

Harlan put his hand on Cody’s back. “Come on, let’s go back to the house.”

They got back and Cody headed toward his part of the house. “I’m going to make that call.”

“Okay, son. We’ll be in the den. We’ll probably make some food when you want dinner. Maybe in about an hour or so.”

Cody managed a small smile. “You don’t have to check up on me, Dad. I’m okay.”

“Oh, I’m not...”

Billie smiled and put her hand on Harlan’s chest. “We’re absolutely going to check up on you. You’re not in this alone.”

Harlan was startled when Cody gave Billie a hug. “Thanks, Billie.”

“You’re welcome.”

Cody smiled and headed toward his room with Blitz following close behind. Billie turned toward Harlan. He pulled her into a kiss and whispered, “Thank you.”

Harlan followed Billie and Daisy on Charger as they rode out to the creek. They decided they needed a break from the last few days. It had been a lot for both of them. Cody seemed to be doing better. He and Blitz had gone into town for an appointment with his therapist. Cody said after the appointment he was taking Blitz to the pet store for a new toy. A thank you for standing guard. It hurt him that he couldn't take away his son's pain. All he could do was be there for him. He prayed to God every night that was enough. He also prayed he was enough for Billie.

He watched as she rode Daisy in a slow trot. She was a natural on a horse and her instincts for the business seemed to be on point. She was a good leader and the men were already devoted to her. Harlan smiled. They weren't the only ones. Billie was an amazing woman and a lot stronger than she thought.

Billie glanced back at Harlan and smiled. She liked keeping just ahead of him. She was trying to keep ahead of everything for the last few weeks. At least with Harlan, she could enjoy the effort. She'd struggled to keep her emotions in check. Losing Gran, inheriting the ranch, all of it felt, at times, overwhelming. But when she looked at Harlan and saw that funny, lopsided smile, she knew she wasn't alone. And she knew she never would be.

They got to the creek and dismounted, giving the horses a chance for a drink. They tied up the horses and sat at edge of the creek, watching the water flowing past.

"I talked to my boss today."

"How did it go?"

"He wasn't happy about it and wanted me to work from here. I told him no. Inheriting the ranch meant my focus would be here."

"What did he say?"

Billie chuckled. "Well, he's never been the quickest on the uptake. He finally put two and two together. He realized the ranch was *the* Kilbourne Ranch. He's a horse guy. He finagled an invitation for next month to go riding."

“How did he do that?”

“It’s funny. He said since I’d always talked about writing a book maybe I should write one about the ranch, you know it’s history, the feud.” She leaned her head against his shoulder and he wrapped his arm around her.

“Emma and Josiah?”

“Maybe. He said if I wrote the history, he would publish it. They’re a big part of the history. I was looking in the den last night and I found a bunch of love letters from Josiah to Emma. I only read the first one. He loved her so much. I can only imagine his heartbreak when he lost her.”

“You know, I seem to recall a few old trunks in the attic. We could look to see if Josiah kept Emma’s letters.”

“We could,” she smiled. They sat for a while and looked at the water running over the rocks. “Can we stay here forever?” she asked.

He chuckled. “That sounds great.” A breeze blew through the trees and the horses whinnied. He brushed a stray curl from her cheek. “I love you, Billie Kilbourne.”

Billie looked up at him and smiled. “I love you, Harlan Boone.” She gave him a tender kiss.

He pulled her tight against him. “Now what do we do?” he smiled.

“For right now, we sit here and watch the water.”

A woman in a violet dress watched from a distance as the couple shared a kiss. “They’re going to be fine,” a voice said. She turned to see a young woman in a long gingham dress walking toward her. A woman she recognized.

“Emma?”

“Hello, Miss Willa.” The horses whinnied and Emma looked past her. A young man was moving back and forth between Daisy and Charger. “Josiah, stop that. You know it startles the horses.”

“Yes, dear.” The young man walked toward her. He wearing old jeans and boots, a vest over a plain spun shirt and a brown Stetson.

“You’re Josiah Boone.”

“Yes, Miss Willa.”

“Josiah, I was just telling Miss Willa that Billie and Harlan are going to be fine. They will have many happy years together.”

“That’s true.” He looked at Harlan and Billie, leaning against each other. “Harlan’s a handsome fella. Looks like his grandpa.”

“Several times great grandpa,” said Emma.

Josiah rolled his eyes. “Still a handsome fella.”

“Miss Willa, you’ve done a wonderful job, but now it’s time for you to rest.”

“I need to watch over them. I promised. Billie needs me.”

“You gave her everything she needs to move on. But we’ll continue to watch over them for you.”

“Continue?” asked Willa.

“We’ve been watching and waiting for these two their whole lives.”

“It sure took ‘em long enough,” said Josiah. “I would think my kin would have been a little quicker on the draw.”

“Josiah, they were children when they first met.”

He smiled and put his hand on Emma’s shoulder. “So were we.”

“Those were different times. This is their time, starting now.”

“I should look out for Billie,” said Willa.

“Billie is stronger than she thinks. She’s going to be fine. Someone else is waiting for you,” Emma pointed past Willa. She turned and saw a vision she’d dreamed of for thirty years. He was young and handsome, like when they’d first met. She looked back at Emma. “That’s my Robert.”

“Yes, it is.”

Willa looked back and held out her hand. She saw it was no longer the hand of an old woman. She was young again. Robert came toward her and took her hand in his. “Robert, you waited for me.”

“Of course, I waited. Where else would I want to be but with my girl?”

Emma put her hand on Willa’s shoulder. “This is your time. Go enjoy the peace you’ve earned.”

Willa looked at Robert and smiled. He kissed her cheek and a calm washed over her. Willa looked at Billie and Harlan peacefully sitting on the edge of the creek. The water moving across the rocks. The breezes blowing over the grasses. She turned back to Emma and Josiah. “What about the two of you? Shouldn’t you cross over?”

Emma smiled. “You mean to heaven?”

“Yes.”

Emma took Josiah’s hand. “Look around you, Willa,” she smiled. “We’re already here.”